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Statement before a joint hearing:

Protecting the Homeland:
Fighting Pandemic Flu from the Front Lines

The Subcommittee on Prevention of Nuclear and Biological Attack
and
The Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Science, and Technology

Committee on Homeland Security
United States House of Representatives

February 8, 2006

Good afternoon, Chairman Linder, Chairman Reichert, Ranking Members, and distinguished Members of the Committee. It is an honor to appear before you today, to address some of the ways in which business and the private sector can help our country better prepare for and respond to the threat of a pandemic influenza.

My name is Ern Blackwelder. I am here on behalf of Business Executives for National Security (BENS) – a national, non-partisan, non-profit organization comprised of more than 500 business executives –committed to volunteering their time and talents to improve the nation’s security.

Since its inception in 1982, BENS has worked on nuclear non-proliferation initiatives and the application of best business practices into Pentagon support functions. With the turn of the century, BENS’ focus expanded to include the growing threats of terrorism. After 9-11, our members agreed there would be important roles for the private sector in homeland security as well and quickly recognized the wisdom of an all hazards approach.

When facing the threat of pandemic flu, or any catastrophic event, the business community has responsibility in two important areas.

The first is business continuity planning – a term that often includes developing emergency response capabilities to help ensure employee health and safety, as well as making sure that the business survives a catastrophic event. Business preparedness also serves to protect critical infrastructure, ensure availability of urgently needed goods and services, and strengthen economic stability. These challenges would be especially severe in a flu pandemic, where companies could experience absenteeism rates of up to 30 or 40 percent for up to several months.

Pandemic flu business continuity plans encompass a wide variety of activities like hand washing and social distancing, stockpiling supplies, monitoring and assisting the sick, improving virtual work programs such as telecommuting, implementing necessary travel restrictions, cross-training employees, reallocating work activities and reconfiguring shifts to limit disease spread. Large companies typically employ business continuity professionals, while smaller companies often ask operations managers to perform this function along with their other responsibilities.

In December 2005, HHS Secretary Leavitt and DHS Secretary Chertoff co-signed a letter to business leaders containing a checklist to assist companies with pandemic flu business continuity planning (www.pandemicflu.gov and www.cdc.gov/business). In addition to advising businesses on how to prepare themselves for a pandemic, the Secretaries asked businesses to coordinate with external organizations to help their communities. I will focus the remainder of my prepared remarks on this second responsibility of business during times of crisis: that of providing civic leadership – sharing resources and expertise for the benefit of the community and the nation.

While business continuity planning is critical, there are huge gaps in our preparedness and response capabilities nationwide that neither business, nor government can fill alone. We saw those gaps on 9-11, and more recently with Hurricane Katrina. Increasingly, communities recognize the need to bring the best of business and government together to meet these challenges.

Three years ago, BENS began to leverage private sector resources and know-how to work in concert with state and local government to strengthen regional homeland security and disaster

response capability. I'd like to share some of the lessons we've learned and the promise they hold for saving lives.

Through regional public private partnerships we call the Business Force, BENS has mobilized member businesses on a pro bono basis to help state and local government leaders prevent, prepare for, and respond to catastrophic events – including acts of terrorism, natural disasters, or public health emergencies. These partnerships can help reduce loss of life and economic disruption from such events by implementing specific preparedness and response initiatives that tap the expertise and resources of the private sector and build trust between business and government.

Through early collaboration with state and local public health leaders and with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, we've identified four Business Force initiatives of particular value in addressing the threat of a flu pandemic, or other public health emergencies. They include:

- 1) mobilizing business volunteers to assist in the dispensing of the Strategic National Stockpile;
- 2) building Business Response Networks – web-based registries of pledged business resources that can be called upon by public officials in response to a catastrophic event or public health crisis;
- 3) launching the Workplace Sentinel program – enlisting large employers to report anomalous rates of employee absenteeism to provide public health officials early indicators of disease; and
- 4) integrating business into state and local emergency operations and intelligence fusion centers.

Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) Dispensing

BENS worked in partnership with state and local public health leaders in Georgia and the Metro-Atlanta region to mobilize 1,200 private sector volunteers for a live bio-terrorism exercise in July 2005. Our members facilitated a nine-month design effort, during which business volunteers helped state and local public health officials modify their exercise plans to incorporate significant business participation. During the exercise, business volunteers served as both patients and logistics observers at three dispensing sites – two public schools and a private manufacturing facility.

The Atlanta exercise illustrated that local public health districts, responsible for dispensing the SNS, used approximately 40 percent of their personnel to process a patient volume equal to less than five percent of the patient volume expected following an actual airborne anthrax attack. In other words, had this been an actual attack, public health would have had about 10 percent of needed personnel. Similar shortfalls exist under other biological or chemical attack scenarios, although specific personnel requirements would vary.

Following the exercise, BENS worked with state and local public health leaders to create a model that calls for large employers in a given urban area to dispense vaccines or medications to their employees and families, with the understanding that a pre-defined group of employees would then volunteer to go to designated public schools to assist in dispensing to the general public.

This model has the potential to provide a substantial portion of the thousands of volunteers that would be needed in any urban area in the wake of biological or chemical attack. Furthermore, this model can be modified for use in an influenza pandemic by tapping the expertise of BENS members and staff – in areas such as logistics, volunteer recruitment, and building trust between business and government partners – to create a public-private disease monitoring and management program.

Beyond Georgia, public health leaders have expressed interest in implementing this model in each of the regions where BENS has operations – including the states of California, Kansas, Missouri and New Jersey, and the Kansas City and Santa Clara County urban areas selected for emergency preparedness pilots by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Business Response Network (BRN)

Hurricane Katrina demonstrated how a catastrophic event can overwhelm government's ability to respond. Katrina also highlighted the need to create, in advance, a system for effectively utilizing the overwhelming offers of support from the private sector. BENS has implemented a web-based system to meet this need called the Business Response Network, or BRN. The BRN is a regional web database of pledged business resources (warehouse or office space, trucks, equipment, skilled personnel, etc.) that emergency management and public health leaders can call upon in a catastrophe or public health emergency. (www.businessresponsenetwork.org)

BENS has implemented permanent BRN's in New Jersey, Missouri and Kansas, and a temporary BRN for the state of Massachusetts prior to the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The total value of business resources registered to date is approximately \$700 million; however, the potential exists to register tens of billions of dollars in pledged business resources nationwide. Multiple state BRN's could be coordinated through the states' mutual aid program known as EMAC (Emergency Management Assistance Compact). The EMAC system currently applies to public sector resources, however BENS is exploring opportunities to include private sector resources as well.

BENS builds the BRN at the state or regional level for two reasons: 1) state and local governments have primary accountability for first response under the National Response Plan; and 2) it is easier to build trust between business and government at the state and local level.

Until there is a uniform federal standard, concerns about liability protection must be addressed at the state and local level, where laws vary widely. While some businesses may not participate in their state's BRN due to liability concerns, many others have chosen to participate – even with imperfect Good Samaritan laws. These companies recognize that sitting on the sidelines will only lead to higher casualties and greater risk – to the economy, their communities, and their businesses.

The BRN system applies to “all hazards”, but would be especially useful in the event of a pandemic, given its potential scope and duration. Some of the surge capacity requirements of a pandemic – including facilities, transportation, or communications equipment – can be identified and pre-pledged, while other needed supplies might be solicited on-the-fly during an event. The BRN provides an efficient and effective tool for doing both.

Workplace Sentinel

BENS has recently partnered with New Jersey public health leaders to design a web-based reporting system that will enable large employers to report spikes in absenteeism that can alert state epidemiologists. This system, which is planned for implementation in mid-2006, calls for each company to establish a baseline absenteeism rate. When absenteeism exceeds a certain number of standard deviations above baseline, companies will report that information online. Employer data will be anonymously aggregated by county, and then forwarded to state and affected county public health agencies to help identify causes and determine appropriate response.

Business Integration into Emergency Operations and Information Fusion Centers

The SNS Dispensing, BRN and Workplace Sentinel initiatives can all be implemented and exercised in advance, to dramatically improve the response to any catastrophic event or public health emergency. In addition to building these specific capabilities, business and government leaders must learn to communicate effectively and make sound decisions during a crisis. To this end, BENS is facilitating the integration of business representatives into state and local Emergency Operations Centers and Intelligence/Information Fusion Centers.

Establishing a formal business presence at these centers and performing exercises to test the effectiveness of business-government communication will strengthen teamwork and build trust – making it easier to work together effectively during a crisis. BENS is developing pilot programs in Georgia, Metro Kansas City, New Jersey, and in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, and has also been asked to support implementation of similar initiatives in other states.

Mr. Chairman, there is no single model, nor comprehensive program that will fill all the nation’s needs in the event of pandemic flu. It is clear, however, that especially during times of crisis, our nation needs the vast resources, expertise, and capabilities of the private sector. BENS is highly confident in the value of building trust and creating a sturdy bridge between business and government, and we will continue to work with our government partners to strengthen prevention, preparedness and response capabilities.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to answering your questions.